Did your students touch a piece of history today? Alternative ways to teach the Common Core Standards’ higher order thinking skills.

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Bringing in an object for students to explore allows students to touch history and tap into higher order thinking skills. By looking at and handling an object, students learn far more than just about the people who made and used it. They begin to collect meaningful evidence in creating their own cultural study. In this way, objects can be the vehicle for historical investigation and can offer an important supplement to written and oral sources. The purpose of this article is to present a strategy for incorporating historical objects in the classroom as instructional and motivational tools. The article describes a three-step approach to analyzing historical objects. Through object analyses, students develop and extend a variety of skills; many of these skills are included in the Common Core standards.

A man brings a framed 1812 needlepoint sampler to the Road Show and discovers from the appraiser that this find from his grandmother's attic is worth $30,000. He sits with his mouth agape, staring at his new $30,000 investment. He is having a silent war in his mind: should he mention the missing letter in his sampler or will that drop the value of the piece? The appraiser has not noticed... so far. The man cannot contain himself any longer and airs his concern for his flawed needle-point piece. The appraiser informs him that the young girl who stitched this beautiful display was well trained in her skill and knowledge of the alphabet. It was not a mistake that the student left the letter "j" out of the sampler. Rather, at the time the piece was created it was not uncommon to use 'I" and "J" interchangeably as letters.

There is a growing obsession with finding a discarded item at a garage sale for five dollars and then discovering the item is worth $1,000. Just look at the overwhelming number of shows that play on this concept, from Pawn Stars to American Pickers. The shows infuse historical learning with a bit of comedy and, of course, the potential for profit. This hope of acquiring someone's trash or discarded item and then having that item identified as a priceless piece of history is revitalizing the excitement of discovering the past through material culture for both adults and children. Have you seen a child’s expression when he or she enters a grandparent's attic? The look is often one of excitement, wonder, and surprise. The child cannot help but start rummaging through the piles of boxes, crates, and shelves, undeterred by the dust or the odor. The excitement of discovery is undeniable.

Like an old attic, classrooms hold the potential for exciting discoveries, but students are rarely sitting at the edge of their seats waiting to learn. The use of historical objects—everything from political buttons, tools, and dishes to military regalia-- can change this. They are the physical evidence of human experience with the power to excite student’s imaginations. Not only that, but they provide a vehicle for teachers to ensure students are meeting the rapidly proliferating benchmarks in both English Language Arts and social studies.
Teachers feel the pressure of increasing their students’ benchmark assessment scores, which test reading comprehension skills such as inference, comparing and contrasting, and cause and effect. Many teachers believe they must, or are actually instructed by administrators, to abandon social studies instruction for ELA test prep. Social studies is all too often pushed aside subject in favor of ELA and mathematics. For many policymakers and elementary teachers, social studies is important, but nonetheless it is considered an enrichment or second-ranked subject (Zhao & Hoge, 2005). What has gotten lost in the shuffle is the extent to which social studies and other subjects, especially ELA, work together. The same skills are necessary for both subjects. In fact social studies, with its ability to excite students through historical investigation, is a natural vehicle for teaching higher order thinking skills associated with both ELA and social studies.

Why Objects?

Bringing objects into the classroom for students to explore allows students to touch history and tap into higher order thinking skills. By looking at and handling an object, we can learn far more than just who made and used it. Through object exploration students start to collect meaningful evidence for a cultural study. In this way, objects can be the vehicle for historical investigation and can offer a very different kind of knowledge of the past than written or oral sources can provide. The use of objects within the curriculum emphasizes not only content, but also the development of advanced intellectual abilities (Brewer & Fritzer, 2011; Torrez & Waring, 2009). Instead of memorizing facts, writing essays based on isolated writing prompts, or reading informational passages without context or connections; students who explore historical objects define problems, search for textual evidence, compare and contrast texts, and complete expository writing. And they engage in all these activities not under duress, but in a connected and motivated way.

I currently teach elementary ELA and Social Studies Methods courses to pre-service teachers. My students are in classrooms from 8AM until 2PM two days a week. These students are charged each day with creating various small group ELA lessons. With the new Common Core Standards in place, teachers are searching for materials on which to center their instruction. The Common Core Standards (2010) push for a series of skills to be applied to 50% literature-based text and 50% informational text. My students in the field are encouraged again and again by their supervising teachers to use test prep material as their reading program. This approach consists of students reading short, unrelated passages and answering multiple-choice questions. But teachers instinctively know that providing random snippets of social studies content from informational texts accompanied by multiple-choice questions does not constitute teaching social studies content or skills. According to Lindquist (1995), “Most elementary teachers do not see themselves as social studies teachers. When asked, we tend to respond that we are reading teachers or math teachers” (p. 2). Research shows much social studies instruction centers on textbook-based readings and worksheets. Loewen (1995) expands this view by describing textbook narrative as predictable, “every problem has already been solved. Textbooks exclude conflict or real suspense. No wonder students lose interest” (p. 13). Many researchers confirm the negative impact of textbook-dependent social studies instruction (Alter, 2009; Martell & Hashimoto-Martell, 2011; Schall & Bozzone, 1994; Zhao, 2007).

Researchers have shown that a student’s response to social studies and motivation to succeed are highly determinative of success. Shaughnessy and Haladyna (1985) have shown that the teacher is the most important factor in determining students’ response to social studies. Elementary social studies teachers are continually being challenged to create and design new and interesting instructional methods to conquer the challenges of social studies instruction. Zhao (2007) found that “the student-centered activity was the most desirable because it enabled students to obtain in-depth knowledge and it motivated students to learn social studies” (p. 327).
Bringing authentic objects into the classroom is one way to facilitate a student-centered activity in which students are motivated to learn.

In the process of interpreting and analyzing objects students ask many questions including why things were made, how they were used, and what role they played in social, economic and political aspects of a community. Studying objects can offer insights into the daily lives of people and their communities. Searching for information, discovering connections and weighing evidence are just a few of the skills required in object analysis. These skills, according to Bass & Rosenzweig (1999), are “germane to the authentic thinking processes of historians and scholars of society and culture” (p. 6).

Instead of reading a textbook interpretation of history, students should be engaged in the same actions and thought processes as historians exploring the past. Many students leave social studies classrooms with abstract, isolated lists of events and dates. To prevent this, history requires students to synthesize information from all of the disciplines (Wineberg, 2001). Foster and Padgett (1999) capture the essence of this approach: “Genuine historical inquiry demands that students learn to ask authentic questions, to select and examine historical evidence, to appreciate historical context, to evaluate divergent perspectives, and to reach, albeit tentatively, logical conclusions” (p. 2). These skills associated with historical inquiry are directly aligned to the Common Core Standards. In promoting historical inquiry through object-based learning, teachers assist students in the acquisition and mastery of many higher order thinking skills. VanSledright’s (2004) research supports pedagogy that “involve[s] source work, investigations into the traces and shards of the past ... Students – even the young ones – need opportunities to engage these sources, to learn to assess their status, and to begin building and writing up their own interpretations of the past” (p. 232). The historical object is the hook; objects lead students to create a plan of research to find answers to pressing questions. While they are answering these questions, they are developing critical thinking skills including inferring, comparing, contrasting and many more.

Object Analysis

There are numerous and various models of analyzing objects. The models come from a variety of disciplines including anthropology, archeology, architectural history, art history and many others. For the purposes of this article, the strategies outlined below have been condensed from multiple sources and simplified in order to promote critical thinking and historical interpretation in the elementary and secondary classroom. The steps were adapted from an object-inquiry unit developed for the Washington State Historical Society (Lile, 1999) and historian Thomas Schlereth’s (1999) book, Material Culture Studies in America.

Step 1: Analysis

A detailed analysis may be based on a variety of questions that focus on the object’s physical features, construction, function, and design. The chart below displays a series of questions students can explore. Based on preliminary analysis of the object, students develop a hypothesis, focusing on identifying the object and guessing its intended purpose, historical time period and, perhaps, who was its original owner. Before proceeding to the next step, students need to plan a strategy for acquiring the necessary information to prove or disprove the hypothesis.
Table 1. Object Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Describe the Object</th>
<th>How was the Object Made?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Color</td>
<td>Material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shape</td>
<td>Made by hand or machine?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td>Has it been altered?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Step 2: Documentation/Sourcing

This stage puts the students’ plan of investigation to work. It requires students to explore other sources that might tell them more about the object. Students collect and evaluate other artifacts, and data from museums, catalogs, primary documents, material culture reference books, experts, and Internet sites in an effort to prove or disprove their hypotheses. Lile (1999) notes that,

The basic steps in this phase often include finding a similar object with a documented history, locating an image of the object in use, questioning an expert or obtaining oral histories, and determining time period by assessing the technology utilized by the craftsperson. (p. 3)

Students meet a variety of Common Core Standards while engaged in the process of data collection and evaluation, including:

- Reading informational texts to compare and contrast a firsthand and secondhand account of the same event or topic (Standard 6);
- Interpreting information presented visually, orally, or quantitatively and explaining how the information contributes to an understanding (Standard 7); and
- Integrating information from two texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably (Standard 9).

Step 3: Contextualization

Based on the previous two steps, students interpret the data and form a premise. This step might result in the students identifying the object and the time period, however, that may not be the goal. Other objectives for using objects in lessons include comparing objects from multiple time periods, discovery of what life was like during a different time, and acquiring an understanding of the concept of change over time.

In Step 3, students reach conclusions based on research and evidence. They come to understand the historical context of the object and how people lived during a different time. In uncovering the historical use of an object, students discover the customs, status and behaviors of the people who used it and are able to generalize their findings to better understand the economy, technology, politics and society of the era. In this stage, students must be reminded that they bring their own biases to the analysis and that history is a process of interpretation.

In addition to the valuable learning that takes place through the process of contextualizing a historical object, the completion of Step 3 addresses the Common Core requirement that students draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection and research (Standard 9). As a culmination of their work, students can share findings orally or in a written presentation. Either format taps into a variety of Common Core skills. Multiple writing standards are utilized including:
- Students write an opinion piece and support it with facts and details (Standard 1); and
- Students conduct short research projects that build knowledge through investigation; findings are based on data acquired from a variety of sources (Standard 7).

This sequence of Steps 1-3 is a recursive process, allowing for students to alter and adjust hypotheses based on acquisition of knowledge and discussion with other classmates. Throughout the three-step process of object analysis students develop and extend a variety of skills included in Bloom’s Taxonomy, a long-accepted set of learning objectives, as well as the more recent Common Core Standards.

**Table 2. Developing and Extending Skills through Working with Objects**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills Included in Bloom’s Taxonomy</th>
<th>Skills Included in National Common Core Standards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpret</td>
<td>Form Opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain</td>
<td>Compare and Contrast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apply</td>
<td>Establish Perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarify</td>
<td>Identify Contradictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyze</td>
<td>Draw Conclusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate</td>
<td>Weigh Generalizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assess</td>
<td>Recognize Multiple Interpretations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe</td>
<td>Examine Evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesize</td>
<td>Historical interpretation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**How to Infuse Objects into the Lesson**

The following is an example of how to infuse a collection of objects into a lesson. This strategy can be adapted to fit a particular topic, object, or grade level. The strategy is an example of how students will precede through the three steps of object analysis, and in the process, experience historical investigative skills that make for an educated citizenry. To assist students in note-taking throughout the three steps, I have provided an Object Analysis Note Sheet (Figure 2).

**Students as Curators: Show and Tell…**

Arrange a group of related objects, have a group of students go through the steps of object analysis to gain an understanding of the items and time periods. Next, have students take on the role of museum curators. They are to determine the theme of an exhibit, design the display of items and write the individual object description cards, which will be posted in the exhibit. I have used a collection of butter making objects from the 1800s for this activity. Children’s literature can also be incorporated in this process to provide context. Laura Ingalls Wilder’s (1933) *Little House in the Big Woods*, is one example of a children’s book that describes early American self sufficiency, including butter-making in the early prairie days.
To assist students in note-taking, I included an Object Analysis Note Sheet (Figure 2). The note sheet prompts students to closely observe the object, noticing all the minute details and hidden characteristics. It is important for students to consider that the complete object might not have survived and parts or pieces may be missing or altered. Asking students what evidence might provide information concerning how the item was made will encourage students to look for machine markings and/or unique materials, such as evidence of welding, screws or other materials such as plastic. Establishing if the object was made by hand or machine will assist students in time period identification.

After a thorough investigation of the physical features students are asked to develop a hypothesis statement concerning the object. Next, students become researchers. Based on their hypothesis statement students will determine the best resources to explore in hopes of discovering information to either confirm, or disprove, the hypothesis; encourage students to identify at least three sources that confirm the findings. Students might discover conflicting information from two different sources and deeper investigation should be encouraged. If the hypothesis is proven wrong, students can use the new information gained from the research to adjust, or change, their hypotheses statement, but students would then need to identify three new sources that would confirm, or disprove, the new hypothesis.

The note sheet concludes with Step 3, Contextualization. Here, students are asked the basic question: What have you learned about the object? Students may not be able to name the object or its purpose, but based on research, they may be able to infer a great deal of historical information concerning what life was like during a specific time period, how change in technology impacts multiple facets of a society, or how material culture provides evidence to a society’s social norms and values.
After students complete Steps 1-3 and have a thorough contextual knowledge of the items, they identify the theme of the collection and compose the accompanying historical narrative for the exhibit. Throughout the three-step approach, students are continually gaining a deeper understanding of the historical context of the object. Through student observations in Step 1, Analysis, students will notice each butter churn uses a different form of technology to churn the
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cream. While in Step 2, Documentation, through student research they will discover the first butter churns used a wooden container and a plunger. The Stoneware butter churns were a predominate churn utilized in the 1800s. This plunger type churn used a vertical up and down motion and at the end of the plunger handle was a dasher, a small piece of wood that extended across the bottom of the churn, used to agitate the cream. The barrel butter churns were wooden curricular cylinders with a series of paddles inside to move and beat the cream. These churns were constructed in a very similar fashion to barrels, hence the name. They were efficient since the churn was round all the cream was used in the process and four wooden paddles would circulate when the crank was turned causing the cream to turn to butter more quickly than the single dasher style. The picture represents a three-gallon barrel churn and was typically used in the mid 1800s and still sold as a working churn into the mid 1900s. With the invention of refrigeration, and full barrel size churns, the production of butter slowly transitioned from individual families to factories.

Figure 3. Ceramic Butter Churn  Figure 4. Drum Churn

Exploring the two remaining wooden objects students will discover they each provide the same purpose but represent two different types of households. The two wooden butter molds were used to shape the butter after churning. The larger wooden box was used to measure, and shape, one pound of butter. Each pound was then wrapped in a cloth and stored until needed. These blocks of butter were either stored or sold at market. Farmers and working class citizens utilized the one pound butter molds, while aristocratic families utilized individual butter patty molds. These smaller molds have intricate designs carved into the wood, so when removed from the butter, the molds leave a decorative impression on the butter. Common designs included family
crests, animals, such as, a cow or rooster, pineapple, representing hospitality or identification of the butter maker. Butter molds were used in the 1800s and into the mid 1900s.

Figure 5. Butter Mold  Figure 6. Individual Butter Mold

As students complete the three-step object analysis process, and begin to take on the role of the museum curator, crafting their exhibit based on their historical investigation, multiple themes will emerge. Students may consequently identify the theme as “changing technology in butter production.” Some students might identify the theme of the objects differently based on their research in secondary sources, which state that butter-making was generally performed by the children of a family. Consequently, those students may identify the theme as “jobs for children.” Older students in the classroom may learn through their research that the larger one-pound mold was used for the working family and the smaller, individual butter patty mold was used by wealthier families and would typically stamp each patty with a family crest or initials. Thus, the theme might be “butter as a sign of social status.” All findings aid in the understanding of the impact of changing technology on family structure, the economic and social implications to class and wealth, and the progression of industrialization.

Throughout the process, students are learning historical research skills, critical analysis, and communication skills. The teacher, acting as the facilitator, leads the students to helpful resources and models the meta-cognition of questioning necessary in the research process. Through this activity students analyze and evaluate evidence, form an educated opinion, draw conclusions, and present a cohesive, persuasive written finding. Object analysis activities, such as the museum curator activity, creates a form of problem-based and inquiry learning, leading the students on the journey of discovery designed to stimulate students’ motivation and extend skills, concepts and knowledge through the use of historical objects.
Conclusions

Any objects can be used within this exploratory lesson. Fragile artifacts can be made accessible to students by utilizing digital color photographs. These photos can be slipped into glassines and students can circle and highlight with dry erase markers the specific characteristics that are important to their research without marring the document. Museum and archival websites offer a plethora of photos and videos. Valuable resources include the National Archives (http://www.archives.gov/), the Library of Congress (http://www.loc.gov/index.html) and the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History (http://www.mnh.si.edu/). Many state archives, such as the New York State Archives (http://www.archives.nysed.gov/aindex.shtml), are creating educational materials to supplement their vast holdings. Local historical societies also offer a treasure trove of items and expert knowledge. Attics and local flea markets can also be wonderful sources of historical objects. Many store-owners have allowed me to photograph items so my students have the ability to analyze historical artifacts without the cost of procuring the item.

These three activities give students an opportunity to hone their informative, persuasive and narrative writing skills. Students can present findings orally to classmates or publish in class books. Through these presentation formats, students start to evaluate sources, evidence, and lines of argumentation as they compare conclusions and interpretations. The use of artifacts in the classroom is not a new idea but it is essential that implementation draw on and utilize the higher order thinking skills identified within the National and State Common Core standards. When textbooks serve as the informational texts used in classrooms, history can seem boring and remote. But when students are given the opportunity to examine the objects that someone has used in their daily life, they are motivated to piece the story of the object together through analysis, research and interpretation. In this way, engagement with historical objects can kindle a passion for history. VanSledright (2004) believes that with “continued source work and scaffolding from knowledgeable history teachers, a major epistemological shift will occur in how students understand the past and its relationship to ‘history’” (p. 231). It is no accident that the Common Core Standards promote the ability to evaluate evidence and to reason that are essential to citizenship in a democracy (Altoff & Golston, 2010, p. 8). These skills denote a savvy citizen, one who knows how to strategically investigate, discriminate among sources, weigh evidence and craft a strong argument. As it turns out, Antiques Road Show and Pawn Stars have a surprising amount to teach us about the value of history. Do not let your students miss out on the chance to strike it rich.

References


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